19

20

21

22

23

BEFORE THE INSURANCE COMMISSIONER OF THE STATE OF WASHIINGTON

In the Matter of the Application regarding the Conversion and Acquisition of Control of Premera Blue Cross and its Affiliates OIC Docket No. G02-45

The Washington State Medical Association's Reply to Premera's Opposition to Motions to Intervene

and

The Washington State Medical Association's Reply to the OIC Staff's Response to Requests for Intervention

I. INTRODUCTION

Premera's position comes as no surprise. It vehemently opposes the right of *all* groups to participate in the review of its attempt to become an investor-owned, for-profit corporation.

If Premera's approach were adopted, no one would <u>ever</u> be found to have the legally required "significant interest" in a health insurer's proposed conversion.

The Holding Company Acts open the door for outside parties to participate, with full powers of discovery.

Premera wants to slam that door shut. The Insurance Commissioner should not allow this company to exclude the public and undermine the process.

THE WASHINGTON STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S REPLY TO PREMERA'S OPPOSITION TO MOTIONS TO INTERVENE AND THE OIC STAFF'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR INTERVENTION - 1

II. PREMERA FAILS TO ADDRESS KEY WSMA ARGUMENTS

Premera's response sprawls across 51 pages and 62 footnotes. The table of contents alone consumes three pages.

For all its girth, Premera's response is as important for what it does not say as for what it does say.

The company is almost completely silent about many of the core reasons on which the Washington State Medical Association (WSMA) bases its request to be granted Intervener status:

- 1. WSMA members comprise about three-fourths of all physicians who contract with Premera
- 2. WSMA members have treated a vast number of Premera subscribers
- 3. Premera is one of the most important payers for the services of WSMA members, and is the dominant payer in Eastern Washington
- 4. The total value of the claims submitted to Premera by WSMA physicians runs into billions of dollars

See WSMA Supplemental Filing, p. 3.

WSMA members thus have a "significant interest" in the proposed conversion in part because so many of their patients are Premera subscribers, and so much of the revenue physicians depend on to keep their practices economically viable comes from Premera. Id. at 3.

The silence from Premera becomes deafening on the subject of how a conversion might affect policyholders.

The company has nothing to say about most of the concerns the WSMA raises, including

1. Elimination of coverage for the sickest patients

- 2. Elimination of coverage for patients in rural areas
- 3. Reduction of coverage for primary care
- 4. Reduction of comprehensive coverage

(For a list of eighteen different areas of concern, see WSMA Motion to Intervene, pp. 10 - 12).

The WSMA has a "significant interest" in the answers to these questions. Many of its members practice in rural areas. Many of its members are primary care physicians¹. Members who are specialists are affected as well: the availability and caliber of primary care is crucial to the successful detection and treatment by specialists of many diseases and disorders.

Nor does Premera contest the WSMA's contention that a carrier affects the delivery of care when it:

- 1. Limits the time physicians can spend with patients
- 2. Diverts physician time from treating patients to seeking approval for tests, referrals, and procedures
- 3. Creates administrative barriers to delay payment of claims
- 4. Denies valid claims
- 5. Retains discretion over what constitutes "medical necessity"

WSMA Supplemental Motion, p.6; WSMA Motion to Intervene, pp. 3 - 4.

What Premera disputes is the relevance of such practices to the conversion: they "have no logical connection with the issues raised by Premera's Form A filing and are outside the scope of statutory criteria to be considered [.]" Premera Opposition Motion , p. 17, fn. 11.

THE WASHINGTON STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S REPLY TO PREMERA'S OPPOSITION TO MOTIONS TO INTERVENE AND THE OIC STAFF'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR INTERVENTION - 3

¹ According to WSMA membership records, over half the physicians in rural counties (as defined by the State Department of Health) are WSMA members; over 2,600 WSMA members are primary care physicians.

23

Yet Premera concedes that

The Commissioner is required to consider whether reorganization "will substantially increase or will prevent significant deterioration in the availability of health care coverage."

And further concedes that

The OIC must review whether the reorganization is "likely to be hazardous or prejudicial to the insurance buying public."

Id. at 16 - 17 (citations omitted); also at p.28.

These concessions effectively put Premera in agreement with a central tenet of the WSMA's rationale for intervention: a proper review under the Health Carrier Holding Company Act must include a review of the impact on health care. WSMA Supplemental Motion, pp. 3 – 4.

Medical treatment issues are impossible to separate from coverage issues. Insurance industry interference in the doctor - patient relationship - - such as refusing to authorize a test or deciding over a doctor's objection that a procedure is not medically necessary - - prevents patients from enjoying the full and timely use of their insurance benefits.

Thus, the WSMA "significant interest" in the conversion process is based on many factors, including Premera's crucial role in influencing how physicians deliver care, who receives care, and what compensation physicians would receive for the care they provide.

Such factors belie Premera's implausible notion that WSMA does not have a "significant interest" because its "potential injuries are no different from potential injury to any member of the general public." <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>, p. 15 (quotation marks omitted).²

² With typical immodesty, Premera confidently and repeatedly asserts that the WSMA lacks a "significant interest" without ever admitting that neither the law nor the courts provide a precise definition of the term. Premera's reliance on unrelated statutes, case law, and conversion proceedings in other states is addressed in the <u>Joint Reply to OIC</u> Staff and Premera Opposition to Motions to Intervene.

III. PREMERA'S CONVERSION WOULD AGGRAVATE EXISTING HEALTH CARE PROBLEMS AND CREATE NEW ONES

Premera wants us to believe that, since it is not responsible for all of the problems plaguing the health care system, we should not look into any of the problems caused by its existing or future business practices.

This "all or nothing" approach is not recognized by law or common sense.

The WSMA readily accepts that some of the turmoil in the health care system has nothing to do with Premera, whether it remains non-profit or not.

As Premera's response points out, the WSMA has done studies of unrelated challenges such as the liability insurance crisis and government reimbursement policies. Premera Opposition Motion, p.17, fn. 11, p. 42.³

The company thereby inadvertently reinforces the WSMA's point that it possesses a wide array of knowledge about the state's health care market.

The conversion obviously did not create problems that are already present. The WSMA's concern is that the conversion would greatly exacerbate many of those problems - - and create new ones.

21

23

³ Premera overlooks the many studies the WSMA has conducted that involve insurance industry practices. Among recent studies are two the WSMA did using practice data collected in 2000 and 2001 through its Medical Practice Data Project (MPDP). The University of Washington's Health Data Analysis Program recent study on the practice environment was based largely on MPDP data.

In addition, the WSMA regularly conducts physician attitudinal research which shows widespread frustration with the insurance industry. Premera of course is well aware of such frustration, at the very least from the Washington Healthcare Forum, in which it participates along with the WSMA to try to resolve certain problems, and from ICAR, the Insurance Claim Assistance Request service that WSMA offers its members, which regularly puts the organization in touch with payers regarding claims disputes.

20

22

For example, it is true, as Premera mentions, that even without converting it can drop out of programs that serve the poor and near-poor, such as Healthy Options and the Basic Health Plan. Id. at 17, fn. 12.

What Premera fails to acknowledge is that converting to a for-profit company would transform its mission. Its obligation would shift from the current one - - providing pre-paid health care benefit programs to a broad range of subscribers - - to one of meeting the financial expectations of its investor owners.

The imperative to maximize profit increases the likelihood that Premera would dump its poorest subscribers. Such a decision could have a domino effect and cause that entire segment of the market to collapse, as happened when Premera withdrew from the individual market. See WSMA Supplemental Motion, pp. 8-9.

IV. THE TRUE ROLE OF PHYSICIAN REIMBURSEMENT

Premera opines that the WSMA's true motive in wishing to participate in the review process must be the protection of physician reimbursement rates. <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>, pp. 31 - 33.

For "proof", Premera completely disregards both WSMA filings and their consistent emphasis on public health and patient care.

Instead, Premera lifts a total of four sentences from four different persons delivering lengthy remarks on the company's proposals. <u>Id.</u> at 31, fn. 37.

Even with Premera's selective pruning of the record, there is nothing remarkable about what was said. Of course the WSMA is concerned about physician reimbursement rates. They are nearly always the main source of income to physicians who treat patients.

Supplemental Motion, p. 7.

16

18

23

TO MOTIONS TO INTERVENE AND THE OIC STAFF'S

RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR INTERVENTION - 7

Fewer physicians inevitably mean that fewer people will receive care, and that when people do receive care, it will be at higher prices. Id. at 7 - 8.

Premera tries to deflect attention away from this reality by raising the specter of premium hikes: "The level of Premera's payments to providers is directly tied to rates paid by Premera's policyholders. The higher the level of the reimbursement rates to providers, the higher the premiums for Premera's subscribers." Premera Opposition Motion, p. 32.

But reimbursement rates are much more than that: "They are not merely a matter of

parochial interest. Instead, inadequate reimbursement is directly connected to a growing threat in

our state: the economic viability of medical practices and physician flight." WSMA

This assertion is not backed up with any evidence. In fact, Premera has raised its premiums far faster than it has raised reimbursement to physicians.

During the period 1999-2002, for example, Premera individual policyholders experienced rate increases totaling more than 90 percent. Small group policyholders saw premiums increase more than 50 percent during the same period. OIC Public Rate Filings for Premera and Blue Cross of Washington. Few practice groups, if any, received increases anywhere close to this magnitude during these years.⁴

Premera's intent here is not really to express concern about the effect of premium increases on its subscribers.

⁴ The physician reimbursement data are not required to be filed with the Office of the Insurance Commissioner (OIC). The WSMA does not collect such data because of anti-trust concerns. Additionally, the practice mix of each group makes a meaningful comparison difficult. Rate data on individual and small groups are readily available. Rate information on large employer groups is not because of ERISA.

18

22

Its professed concern is in stark contrast to its actual conduct. Looking at the individual market alone, Premera raised its rates 16.5% in 1999, 23.8% in 2000, 21.8% in 2001, and 29.76% in 2002.

What Premera really wants to convey is clear: that the WSMA is somehow sordid and greedy to care about physician reimbursement rates.

"Notwithstanding all their protestations about the woes facing health care" Premera intones, "the provider associations are fundamentally seeking to safeguard their members' reimbursement levels"; later it adds, "Justice is poorly served by granting privileges only to a few self-appointed groups who wish to pursue self-serving agendas." Id. at 33, 46.

Before Premera gives another sermon about the evils of greed, perhaps it should consider this proposal: the WSMA invites each member of Premera's senior executive team to renounce, in writing and under oath, any personal financial benefit if Premera is allowed to convert to a forprofit and any personal financial benefit if Premera is later sold to another company.

IV. PREMERA'S ANTI-TRUST CONSPIRACY

In a related accusation, Premera hatches a conspiracy theory: "Disclosure of Premera's confidential reimbursement data to the providers could result in collusion and the danger of artificially high reimbursement rates, leading to higher premiums", all of which "raises serious antitrust concerns." Id. at 34.

With this accusation, Premera tries to keep from the WSMA a wide array of information by focusing on the one narrow area where antitrust concerns might theoretically apply: provider reimbursement data.

The antitrust concerns are more theoretical than actual, however.

17

21

22

23

The federal government expressly approves of provider participation in exchanges of price and cost information under certain circumstances consistent with the situation at hand. See 1996 Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission Statements of Antitrust Enforcement Policy in Health Care, Number 6.

The Department of Justice also recently authorized the dissemination of reimbursement rate information by insurance companies to WSMA members. See September 23, 2002 Business Review Letter to the WSMA, posted on the DOJ web site.

DOJ approved conducting a survey of WSMA members regarding reimbursement rates on a carrier-specific basis - - precisely the kind of information at issue here. Survey results would be made available to WSMA members and the general public.

Information comparing several carriers' reimbursement rates could potentially lead to anti-competitive conduct, but here the information is coming from only one carrier. In any event, the WSMA has safeguards in place that are acceptable to the DOJ and designed to prevent harm.5

Moreover, the DOJ cites, with apparent approval, a number of competitive benefits likely to arise from publishing such information, all of which apply here. Id. at pp. 4-5.

The WSMA suspects that these pro-competitive benefits are precisely why Premera is fighting so hard to keep the information confidential.

⁵ Premera's style of advocacy is illustrated by its passing mention of a lawsuit in which a handful of WSMA members is being sued for price fixing. Premera Opposition Motion, p. 35, fn. 46. Allegations in a lawsuit are not the same as established facts. Nor is the possibility that some information could be used to violate the law a principled reply to otherwise relevant and lawful requests for information.

V. THE WSMA IS NEEDED EVEN WITH THE DILIGENT EFFORTS OF THEOIC AND ITS CONSULTANTS

In an impressive display of flexibility, Premera switches from a narrow interpretation of the Insurance Commissioner's authority in its Motion for Partial Reconsideration to a broad interpretation of his powers in its Opposition Motion.⁶

The WSMA sides with the broad interpretation of the Commissioner's powers, and concurs with Premera that "the Commissioner is charged with protection of the public interest." <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>, p. 25 (citation omitted).

The obligation to protect the public interest argues *for*, not *against*, inclusion of the WSMA in the review process.

Premera implies that the act of seeking intervention is tantamount to a "no-confidence" vote in the OIC and Attorney General's Office. <u>Id.</u> at 16, 24 - 26.

This implication is simply not true. Once again, Premera is trying to render the statutes meaningless: the right to intervene comes with the assumption that the regulators are vigorously fulfilling their duties. The section of the Health Carrier Holding Company Act that permits intervention also requires the Commissioner to review voluminous financial material from the company seeking to convert. RCW 48.31C.030.

The desire to intervene does not mean that the WSMA believes that the OIC and its outside consultants are performing inadequately but rather that, as the largest physician group in the state, the WSMA offers unique insight into the health care delivery system and its relation to

THE WASHINGTON STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S REPLY TO PREMERA'S OPPOSITION TO MOTIONS TO INTERVENE AND THE OIC STAFF'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR INTERVENTION - 10

⁶ Compare "The Commissioner thus may not arbitrarily decide that the Statement will not be considered 'complete' until 'the adjudicative hearing has concluded and the administrative record is closed", <u>Premera's Motion for Partial Reconsideration</u>, p. 8, to "The Holding Company Acts confer broad authority on the Commissioner to review and require relevant information [and] to investigate the proposed investigation [.]" <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>. P. 24

public health and patient care. See WSMA Motion to Intervene, p. 6; WSMA Supplemental Motion, pp. 4-5.

The fact that one of the OIC's outside consultants has "extensive experience in the health care industry from a multitude of perspectives", Premera's Opposition Motion, p. 6, does not preclude full participation by the WSMA.

The WSMA has already set forth in great detail the ways in which it would enhance the review process, including identifying:

- 1. A specific example of how it would approach questions regarding claims and underwriting practices
- 2. The general skills it brings to the discovery and evaluation of health insurance industry practices
- 3. The intimate knowledge of past carrier actions in the state and their consequences. WSMA Supplemental Motion, pp. 5-9.

VII. THE WSMA'S PARTICIPATION AS A PARTY WILL NOT IMPEDE BUT **IMPROVE THE REVIEW PROCESS**

Premera's remaining argument is that allowing intervention would throw the process into chaos: "there is no way that seven collective intervenor groups . . . can be included without destroying order and greatly prolonging the hearing." <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>, p. 4.

Premera's commitment to promptness and order would be more persuasive if it hadn't already delayed the review and repeatedly failed to comply with OIC requests for information.

In the short time since Premera made its initial Form A filing in September, the OIC has had to send the company two deficiency letters for failure to turn over required information. First

19

THE WASHINGTON STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S REPLY TO PREMERA'S OPPOSITION TO MOTIONS TO INTERVENE AND THE OIC STAFF'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR INTERVENTION - 12

Status Report of OIC Staff, p. 1, 2. The record is replete with attempts by the agency and its consultants to see company data and meet with senior executives, only to be rebuffed by Premera's claims of confidentiality or unavailability. Id. at p. 2, 4.

Concern over duplication or useless delay is understandable with multiple parties participating. As with any complex case, reasonable limits upon all parties can and should be established.

The WSMA welcomes the OIC Staff's suggestion that a conference be convened to set the parameters of discovery. <u>OIC Staff Response</u>, p.14.

There is hardly a risk that the WSMA would engage in excessive discovery in any scenario. The organization has very modest resources, in contrast to Premera, which will spend millions of dollars in an effort to prevail.⁷

The other major suggestion the OIC Staff makes to streamline the proceedings is the formation of two intervener parties, one for consumers, and another for providers. <u>Id.</u> at 12 - 14.

While the WSMA is extremely grateful to the Staff for its recommendation that the Association be granted Intervener status, a single party for providers may not be possible because of the Rules of Professional Conduct governing the legal profession.

Those rules prohibit an attorney from representing parties whose interests may be in conflict. RPC 1.7. There is an actual conflict here, not just a potential one: it is the WSMA's understanding that the Washington State Hospital Association will soon file a suit against

⁷ A small but telling example occurred at the November 26, 2002 hearing on Premera's Motion for Partial Reconsideration. There were only two attorneys among the many applicant-interveners who spoke, counsel for Columbia Legal Services and counsel for the WSMA. Premera had four lawyers participate: its top two legal officers, as well as two senior partners from a prominent firm acting as its outside counsel.

Premera asserting a right against a portion of its assets should the corporation be dissolved and organized into a for-profit entity.

Two separate parties for the providers should not impede the proceedings. First, the provider parties would be far from unwieldy: the Community and Migrant Health Centers wish to join the consumer group, and the University of Washington School of Medicine has indicated it does not intend to conduct any discovery (other than reserving the right of rebuttal).

Second, and more importantly, the provider and consumer groups have demonstrated their ability to cooperate and coordinate their activities. For a full discussion, see Joint Reply to OIC Staff Response and Premera Opposition to Motions to Intervene.

The WSMA is committed to continuing to coordinate its efforts with all other parties granted Intervener status, to the maximum extent allowed by law and the rules of ethics.

Rather than offer constructive proposals, as the OIC Staff does, Premera says that the WSMA and others should be content to speak at public hearings, use the e-mail link on the OIC web site, and perhaps make comments at the conclusion of the adjudicative hearing. <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>, p. 2, 47.

The Commissioner has held a series of four public meetings across the state about the conversion application, and plans to hold another round of such meetings after making his ruling.

It is the WSMA's belief that the Commissioner conducted these hearings, and developed the web site, not as a substitute for granting Intervener status to a party with a "significant interest", but rather as a commendable effort to keep the public informed about the conversion.

The limited scope of the public hearings is why Premera is so eager to confine the WSMA's role to appearances there. After all, each speaker is given only four minutes, with no

18

19

20

21

22

right to examine or cross-examine Premera officials, who do not testify under oath and are under no obligation to provide company documents.

Premera has revealed, in its Response, and in much of its conduct in this matter, a resistance to meaningful scrutiny.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Near the end of its response, Premera states that "The interests of justice are better served" if the process were "free of interference by would-be interveners." <u>Premera Opposition Motion</u>, p. 46.

Actually, only Premera's interests would be better served if the process were free of such "interference."

For the reasons set forth in this Reply, and the WSMA's previous Motion to Intervene and Supplemental Motion, the Washington State Medical Association respectfully requests that the Insurance Commissioner grant it Intervener status, with full discovery rights, in the review of Premera's attempt to convert to a for-profit corporation.

Dated this 19th day of December, 2002. 2 Respectfully Submitted by: 3 4 5 Jeff Coopersmith, WSBA #20932 6 Coopersmith & Associates, Inc. Attorney for Applicant-Intervener 7 Washington State Medical Association 8 9 (Anti-trust analysis done by Andrew K. Dolan, WSBA #11008) 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23

PROOF OF SERVICE

1	TROOF OF SERVICE	
2	I certify that I served a copy of this document on all parties or their counsel of record o	
3	the date below as follows:	
4	X US Mail Postage Prepaid	
5	ABC/Legal Messenger	
6	Hand delivered by	
7	I certify under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Washington that the	
8	foregoing is true and correct.	
9	DATED this 19 th day of December, 2002, at Seattle, WA.	
10		
11		
12	Att	frey Coopersmith corney at Law, WSBA #20932 opersmith & Associates, Inc.
13	70	Fifth Avenue, Ste 4200 attle, WA 98104
14		uuc, WA 90104
15	James Odiorne	Tova Deilau
16	Deputy Commissioner	Taya Briley Association of Washington
17	Office of the Insurance Commissioner	Public Hospital Districts 300 Elliott Avenue W, Ste 300
18	PO Box 40259 Olympia, WA 98504-0259	Seattle, WA 98119
19	John P. Domeika	Michael Madden Michael S. Shachat
20	Senior Vice President, General Counsel	Bennett Bigelow & Leedom, P.S. Attorney at Law
21	Premera Blue Cross PO Box 327, MS 316	999 Third Avenue, Ste 2150 Seattle, WA 98104
22	Seattle, WA 98111	

THE WASHINGTON STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S REPLY TO PREMERA'S OPPOSITION TO MOTIONS TO INTERVENE AND THE OIC STAFF'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR INTERVENTION - 16

23

Coopersmith & Associates, Inc. 701 Fifth Avenue, Suite 4200 Seattle, WA 98104 206-262-8209

1 Eleanor Hamburger Karen Perdue Associate Vice President John Midgley 2 Columbia Legal Services University of Alaska 101 Yesler Way, Ste 300 P.O. Box 5160 3 Seattle, WA 98104 Fairbanks, AK 99775 4 Richard Spoonemore James J. Davis Sirianni, Youtz, Meier and Amy McCullough 5 Spoonemore Alaska Legal Services Corporation 701 Fifth Avenue, Ste 3410 6220 Far Point Drive Seattle, WA 98104 Anchorage, AK 99507 6 7 Daniel S. Gross **Greg Montgomery** Deborah A. Dorfman **Bob Walerius** 8 Miller Nash LLP David B. Girard Washington Protection & Advocacy 4400 Two Union Square 9 System 601 Union Street 180 West Dayton, Ste 102 Seattle, WA 98101-2352 Edmonds, WA 98020 10 Kirk A. Dublin Margaret Peyton Carol S. Arnold 11 Dina L. Yunker Preston Gates & Ellis LLP 12 **Assistant Attorneys General** 701 Fifth Avenue, Ste 5000 UW School of Medicine Seattle, WA 98104 Health Sciences and Medical Centers 13 Section Melanie C. deLeon 14 Warren G Magnuson Health Assistant Attorney General Sciences Center Office of the Attorney General 15 Box 357255 1125 Washington Street S.E. Seattle, WA 98195-7255 Olympia, WA 98504-0100 16 17 18 19 20 21 22

23

PROOF OF SERVICE

I certify that I served the original and twelve copies of this document on the Office of the Insurance Commissioner, by hand, on the date below:

I certify under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Washington that the foregoing is true and correct.

DATED this 19th day of December, 2002, at Seattle, WA.

Christine Daugherty Investigator Coopersmith & Associates, Inc. 701 Fifth Avenue, Ste 4200 Seattle, WA 98104